



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT of HEALTH

GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

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For More Information, Contact:

Karen Oby

Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity

North Dakota Department of Health

Phone: 701.328.2496

E-mail: koby@state.nd.us

This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D., M.P.H.T.M., North Dakota Department of Health.

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In Celebration of World Breastfeeding Week

World Breastfeeding Week is observed around the world August 1 through 7, 2004. As North Dakota's state health officer, I appreciate this opportunity to highlight the importance of breastfeeding for mothers, babies and society. Supporting mothers in their efforts to breastfeed their babies will help us build a *Healthy North Dakota*.

Currently, fewer than 60 percent of North Dakota mothers are breastfeeding their babies when they leave the hospital, and only about 40 percent are still breastfeeding when their babies reach 12 weeks of age. Research shows that breastfeeding is necessary for healthy infants, children, mothers and society. Research also indicates that feeding babies formula increases many health-related costs.

Nationally, the cost of treating diseases and conditions preventable by breastfeeding is more than \$3.6 billion a year. Breastfeeding protects children against asthma, allergies, diabetes, overweight and obesity, and mothers who breastfeed are less likely to develop breast cancer, ovarian cancer, thyroid cancer, osteoporosis and lupus.

The *Healthy North Dakota* Breastfeeding Committee – comprised of stakeholders from across the state – is focusing on increasing breastfeeding rates by targeting three areas: (1) the health-care system, (2) the workplace, and (3) the community.

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600 E. Boulevard Ave. Dept. 301, Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0200
Phone: 701.328.2372 Fax: 701.328.4727

E-mail: health@state.nd.us

Visit the health department home page at www.ndhealth.gov.

The Health-Care System

Just providing literature or counseling during routine office visits does not effectively promote breastfeeding. Instead, other supportive efforts have proven to work. For example, referring pregnant women and their significant-others to structured breastfeeding education and behavioral-counseling programs increases the breastfeeding success rate.

In addition, supportive hospital procedures can be effective, such as the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, which awards hospitals “baby-friendly” status. To receive the award, hospitals must meet rigorous standards, such as rooming-in, helping mothers initiate breastfeeding within 30 minutes of giving birth, and not accepting free or low-cost supplies of formula, bottles or pacifiers.

The Workplace

Because they plan to return to work, many women do not even begin breastfeeding, and many others quit breastfeeding when they return to work. Supportive workplaces are essential for women who breastfeed, especially in North Dakota, where 77 percent of women who have young children are in the workforce – the second highest rate in the nation.

To promote breastfeeding, employers can provide health insurance coverage that supports breastfeeding and can make the workplace baby-friendly by allowing a mother to bring her baby to work for the first six months, providing privacy and flexible work schedules, and increasing the length of paid maternity leave.

The Community

To help increase the number of mothers who breastfeed their babies, communities can create supportive environments where women may breastfeed comfortably. In addition, state legislatures across the nation are taking steps to protect the rights of women and infants to breastfeed and to make it easier to continue breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding benefits an infant’s growth and development, and promotes mother, infant and family bonding. The North Dakota Department of Health, the *Healthy North Dakota* Breastfeeding Committee and the North Dakota WIC Program join with mothers and families, health organizations and countries around the world to celebrate World Breastfeeding Week. For more information or to join the *Healthy North Dakota* Breastfeeding Committee, contact Karen Oby, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.2496.

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